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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001149

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN'S EVOLVING FACE OF NEUTRALITY

Classified By: Charge Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Eight months into his term in office, Berdimuhamedov's diplomatic activity and public statements this year have begun to reveal a redesigned version of Turkmenistan's longstanding policy of "permanent neutrality" that may well assure the country's security and independence, while enabling greater international cooperation and facilitating the country's much-needed development. Although strong military or security relations in any one direction continue to be unlikely, Russia is regaining ground in the security relationship that was lost under former President Niyazov. Having begun at the zero mark, however, the limited nature of Russia's gain suggests that Berdimuhamedov's government is more interested in normalizing and balancing foreign relationships and avoiding geographically-complicated security partnerships than in choosing military allies. END SUMMARY.

NEW INTERPRETATION OF AN OLD IDEA

¶2. (C) In his February inauguration speech, President Berdimuhamedov, among other things, promised citizens that he would continue Niyazov's "permanent, positive neutrality" policy while also expanding relations with other countries in a way that would benefit Turkmenistan. To that end, Berdimuhamedov has already made 11 foreign trips, and his government has welcomed very close to 300 foreign delegations -- all since February. In practice, however, Berdimuhamedov's government has been interpreting the neutrality policy in a significantly different way than his predecessor, who used the policy in part to isolate the country from neighbors and the rest of the world and strengthen his internal control. The new interpretation is allowing this president selectively to consider Turkmenistan's participation in bilateral and multilateral partnerships that have the potential to facilitate the development of national energy resources, promote improvement

of social conditions, gradually reform the economy, and modernize its military.

13. (C) Berdimuhamedov's government is well aware that it lacks the expertise and tools to engage in these changes alone. Since taking office, Berdimuhamedov has shown every sign that he wants to establish strong relations with multilateral fora, such as the United Nations, the EU, and possibly the CIS, on the condition that these partnerships tangibly serve his long-term goals of reversing the country's isolation, and jumpstarting development and economic and social reform to bring Turkmenistan into the 21st century.

NEUTRALITY HAS ITS MERITS

14. (C) The president's calculated use of the neutrality card since coming into office suggests that he values the policy's utility to enable Turkmenistan to rebuff neighboring state and multilateral pressure to join organizations with military or security elements, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States and its security subset, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CIS/CSTO), or NATO. He stated in February, shortly after taking office, that Turkmenistan would limit its involvement in regional or multilateral fora until it is convinced that participation in any group would have long-term utility.

15. (C) But his interpretation of neutrality has also allowed Turkmenistan to participate in multilateral organizations on a level that he perceives useful in helping Turkmenistan with some of its problems. For example, this year, Turkmenistan

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signed up to be a member of the UN-sponsored Central Asia Regional Information Coordination Center (CARICC), which fosters regional cooperation on counter-narcotics and other issues. Turkmenistan's Border Guard chief participated in this year's CIS Border Guard Chief Conference, and President Berdimuhamedov attended the SCO Summit in Bishkek and the CIS/CSTO Summit in Dushanbe, but senior officials appear more intent on keeping abreast of developments within these organizations than in participating in their initiatives.

NEUTRALITY - CALCULATED AVOIDANCE

16. (C) Berdimuhamedov's actions suggest that he is evaluating Turkmenistan's participation in all military and security-oriented multilateral organizations, and is unlikely to be interested in doing much more than observing them for the foreseeable future. Berdimuhamedov's government has two good reasons for maintaining the neutrality policy in this narrow vein. First, the policy has shown its value in staving off Russian and possibly Chinese pressure to engage in multilateral military cooperation via the SCO or CSTO.

17. (C) Such cooperation would run the risk of putting off Western countries interested in and ready for a long-term energy partnership. Of course, it also negates the likelihood of significant Western partnerships on other than a limited bilateral basis, because the neutrality policy would collapse if it were applied only in one direction. Since Turkmenistan has little in the way of territorial enemies, the country's leadership has likely assessed the loss as acceptable.

18. (C) Second, the Turkmen government knows that maintaining the policy has a calming effect on Iranian concerns that the West might want to threaten them from Turkmen territory. With the shared 992 kilometer border in mind, the Turkmen government in the past has successfully promoted its neutrality policy to Iranian leaders as a hedge against potential hostile action from the north.

NATO RELATIONS HEALTHY, BUT UNLIKELY TO EXPAND MUCH

¶9. (C) On the other hand, as a NATO Partnership For Peace (PFP) member since the mid-1990's, Turkmenistan has had a small, but steady level of cooperation with NATO. The country's partnership plan has remained unchanged for years and consists of familiarization and training courses. Rather than ending Turkmenistan's relationship with NATO, the current partnership plan with Turkmenistan, and Berdimuhamedov's apparent interest in increasing military cooperation in all directions, is likely to provide NATO a sound basis for further discussions in such areas as the re-evaluation or expansion of transit options to support ISAF operations in Afghanistan. Both NATO and EU officials are cautiously optimistic that partnership opportunities with Turkmenistan will increase in the near term. Berdimuhamedov is scheduled to meet with a variety of EU officials in Brussels for three days in early November, and NATO representatives are hoping to meet with him as well.

BILATERAL MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS BLOSSOM -- WITHIN THE NEUTRALITY VASE

¶10. (C) Berdimuhamedov has allowed senior military officials to travel abroad in support of the government-wide effort to expand its foreign relations and modernize the military. Defense Minister Mammetgeldiyev has visited Belarus, Russia, and, according to press reports, plans to visit China in November to discuss bilateral military cooperation. As of early April 2007, Turkmenistan had invited Russia, Belarus,

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and Ukraine to compete for the right to repair and upgrade its aging Soviet-era equipment. Turkmenistan also appears to be resurrecting modest bilateral military cooperation with Russia. Such datapoints demonstrate that Berdimuhamedov seeks a balanced series of relationships with players from Russia, the East, and the West.

¶11. (C) During discussions with U.S. military leaders, Turkmenistani officials have consistently cast all military cooperation within the framework of Turkmenistan's neutrality. Basing is not an option, but Berdimuhamedov has continued the country's support of U.S. military operational agreements, such as the USAF refueling operation at Ashgabat Airport, overflight and landing clearance, and the Mary Divert arrangement. However, this has not impeded the steady expansion of the U.S. bilateral military-to-military cooperation program. Although still very limited and difficult, the United States likely has had the most robust bilateral relationship of all Turkmenistan's security partners.

¶12. (C) The impact of the neutrality policy on bilateral versus multilateral relationships was evident during the USCENTCOM Commander's June visit to Ashgabat. Berdimuhamedov expressed his concern about Caspian maritime security and said cooperation with the U.S. military provided Turkmenistan a good alternative. He indicated that the CIS-sponsored Caspian Force (CASFOR) was mandated to ensure Caspian security, but Turkmenistan's cooperation with CASFOR was not possible because of the neutrality policy.

¶13. (C) COMMENT: The neutrality policy is likely to have a long shelf life here, since it provides the cornerstone for so much of the country's foreign policy. The realities of the country's geography, combined with its energy resource ambitions, all but guarantee that Turkmenistan will continue to manage its growing number of security relationships on a bilateral basis, at a rate with which it is comfortable. But even though Berdimuhamedov will continue to manipulate the policy as he sees fit, he will also value it as a convenient tool to facilitate cooperation with relevant partners who can lead Turkmenistan through economic, security, and social development without undermining the country's effort to find balance. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND